

Remarks of Annie Irvine
Third Grade Teacher
East Hartford Public Schools

Before the Education Committee
Senate Bill 24, Section 28
Teacher Certification

February 21, 2012

Good afternoon, Senator Stillman and Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee.

My name is Annie Irvine and I am here to speak today about the proposed education reform legislation regarding the removal of the Master's Degree requirement as part of teacher certification. I am **strongly against** the elimination of this requirement.

Nothing has impacted the quality of my literacy instruction more than my work in the Master's Degree program at Central Connecticut State University. I began the reading program cohort 3 years ago while teaching third grade in East Hartford, and I continue to draw from these experiences every single day that I work with my third graders in the classroom.

To illustrate the impact that my Master's Degree training has had on my instruction, please come back in time with me to when I began teaching in East Hartford six years ago. At 24, I was full of college confidence. I had been a very successful Honor's student, completing an undergraduate thesis and achieving summa cum laude while earning my degree in Elementary English. I had excelled in student teaching, and had what I had considered to be a successful first year of teaching fourth grade in Bolton, CT. Despite these accomplishments, I did not realize how truly unprepared I was for teaching in a priority district.

Even though my major had been English, I felt especially unprepared to teach reading. While I had learned many of the basic concepts about reading instruction in my undergraduate course, there had been little opportunity for authentic application other than student teaching, and even then the reading structures and curriculum units had already been devised by my cooperating teacher. Additionally, I was overwhelmed by trying to learn new classroom management skills that I had not needed in Bolton, all while trying to grasp a new set of initiatives relevant to priority districts. I did not have the cognitive capacity to draw from the basics I had learned in my undergraduate college program. So, I turned to teacher manuals and stock programs to direct and determine my reading instruction. It was quick and the objectives were written out for me: all I needed to do was follow them. A year later, I tried a reading workshop method because my colleagues were using it. Individual conferences and random strategy lessons were integrated with my prior techniques. Then I experimented with guided reading because I had heard that teachers needed to have a balanced classroom approach. My reading instruction was simply a hodge-podge of strategies with no real intentionality or logical

sequence. Most importantly, they were lacking a unifying theory of why I was doing them. This was a theory of reading development I did not have because I was unprepared to do so. Had I not entered the reading cohort program to obtain advanced certification in reading, I believe that my instruction would still be determined by popular trends and subjective notions of student needs.

My advanced preparation for a Master's Degree in Reading has provided me with the skills and knowledge to:

- Analyze, evaluate and apply research-based literacy practices into my classroom
- Take on leadership roles to communicate research-based practices to colleagues
- Understand the developmental stages of literacy acquisition
- Select appropriate materials/strategies to support each reader at his or her developmental level
- Discuss with confidence the results of multiple measures of reading ability with students, parents, administrators, and colleagues
- Interpret multiple measures of reading data, including motivational, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary factors
- Develop collegial relationships with my cohort colleagues and professors that enrich my thinking and push me to critically analyze my past practice
- Diagnose primary causes of reading disability
- Determine appropriate strategies for remediating reading disabilities
- Learn and apply the International Reading Association literacy standards
- Understand the critical importance of early language acquisition and phonemic awareness
- Create modifications, select strategies, and provide appropriate support to a variety of readers through the Early Intervention Process and SRBI model
- Provide leadership in data team meetings by suggesting possible causes of reading difficulties, discussing viable strategies for individual readers, and creating lessons that address student needs
- Conduct action research that allowed me to examine the complex field of fluency and its dynamic relationship to comprehension
- Plan intentional reading lessons that build sequentially
- Differentiate reading lessons before, during, and after instruction in conjunction with prior student data and current understanding
- Create reading units that develop multiple aspects of the reader and take into account their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds

As a result of my Master's program, I am amazed with the breadth and depth of knowledge that extended beyond my traditional undergraduate courses. Additionally, taking my Master's concurrently while I taught allowed me to integrate theory and practice in such a way that accelerated my practice.

While the governor may believe this legislation is the way to meet the needs of teachers and students, I simply cannot support removing the Master's Degree requirement. I do not understand how removing the requirement of a master's degree can be considered

progressive. Every teacher that I considered to be at the “master” level had advanced training that either met or exceeded advanced training in a Master’s Degree program. To put it simply, would you want your child in a classroom with a teacher who has an advanced degree, or one who has met only the basic requirements for managing a classroom? Yes, experience and personality count, but with the combined benefit of advanced training, a teacher can draw from multiple sources to develop lessons and strategies that will have the most impact on students. That’s what I consider progressive.